

MIKE AND THE POD PEOPLE

“Are you OK Aunt Flo?” Mike shouted.

Mike and Aunt Flo were riding on the train from Orlando to St. Louis. Mike had never been on a train before and at first he thought it would be interesting. But after many hours of sitting looking out the window, and feeling the sleeping-car rock back and forth, he just couldn't keep his eyes open any longer. He had tried reading, but that soon got boring. Then he tried playing cards with Aunt Flo, but she kept forgetting the rules, and Mike just kept getting madder and madder at her until he decided to give it up and take a nap. The gentle rocking of the train made it easy to fall asleep. Besides, the sleeping car was warm and Aunt Flo was droning on and on about what a nice boy he was, and how lucky she was to have him come for a visit while his parents were in Europe. “She should make a recording,” Mike thought as he was falling asleep, “then she wouldn't have to say that over and over again. In fact, maybe she *is* a recording.” He chuckled as he fell asleep.

As it turned out, Mike would remember this nap for a long time, because this was the first time he had the dream. He would have the same dream many times over the next few weeks, and each time it would grow more sinister and terrifying. It started out innocently enough. He was walking down a long dark hallway toward a bright light. Eventually the hallway led to an open doorway into a bright place. As he walked through the doorway he found himself on a balcony overlooking a wide empty plain. Although the colors weren't quite right, it reminded him of his Uncle Max's place near the Rocky Mountains. No mountains were visible, but he had the feeling that they were there, just over the horizon. As he looked out over the plain, the sky began to grow dark. Clouds filled the sky, and soon large drops of rain began to fall. Although the air was warm at first, it soon became icy cold. The rain got heavier and heavier until it seemed to be coming down in streams instead of drops. The streams seemed to twist and writhe like the tentacles of an octopus. Just at the height of the storm, he began to hear a rustle that sounded like many voices whispering together. One voice became louder than the others, so he could almost make it out. Then, suddenly, an icy tentacle of rain reached out and stroked his hand. The voice, which sounded like metal scraping on metal said, “Yes, this one will do fine!”

Mike woke with a start, and looked over at Aunt Flo. He was still too sleepy to see clearly, but Aunt Flo didn't look right. Her face seemed all baggy like a balloon that had been blown up for too long, and her head was tilted back at a strange angle. Mike rubbed his eyes and shouted, “Are you OK Aunt Flo?” As he removed his hands from his eyes, he could see that Aunt Flo was looking more like her old self. Well, maybe her cheeks quivered a little, but maybe that was just his imagination.

“Yessss, Mike,” she said, sounding a little like the air hissing out of a bike tire. “I'm, I'm, I'm just fine. Thanks.”

“It must have been the dream,” Mike thought. He went back to sleep and didn't wake up until late that afternoon when the train was pulling into the St. Louis station. Mike helped Aunt Flo carry their suitcases to her car. He was glad to be off the train, but the drive home got Aunt Flo jabbering again. “Yes, yes, I've lived in this old house all my

life, all alone since Mom died. Let's see, that must have been fifteen years ago now. By the way, have I told you how nice it is to have a young man like you come for a visit?"

"Yes," Mike answered. "Only about a thousand times," he added silently. He looked out the window at the old houses in Aunt Flo's part of town. She lived in a stately old house in the southern part of town. The house had been owned by her father and grandfather, and had been passed down to her when her parents died. She had never married, but had managed to keep the place up with the money she earned as a secretary. She was now retired, and living comfortably on her pension. Mike had been to her house once many years ago, and as they pulled into the driveway, the place looked exactly as he had remembered. It was an old two-story brick house with a large musty attic full of old books and cast off clothing, and a basement full of junk from the last hundred years or so. Like all houses where funny old ladies live, it smelled of moth balls.

The house still smelled like moth balls, but there was something else too, something's strange. Mike figured that it was just the smell of "somebody else's house," and didn't think anything more about it. He carried his suitcase up to Aunt Flo's guest room and began unpacking his stuff. Besides his regular clothes, he had brought along some of his favorite toys, and his swimming suit. Mom had told him that Aunt Flo went swimming every morning, and was sure to invite him along. Mom had also told him that Aunt Flo would probably keep him pretty busy going to museums and baseball games, so he didn't know if he would have time to use his toys, but he decided to bring some along just in case. One of his favorites was his Space Commander Super Stun Gun that made all sorts of strange noises when you pulled the trigger. And of course, he never went anywhere without his Davy Crockett pocket knife.

By the time Mike got unpacked, it was late, so he and Aunt Flo had some sandwiches for dinner, and went to bed. The next morning, he woke up early and was ready to go swimming, but when he went down to breakfast, Aunt Flo was nowhere to be found. Her car was in the driveway, so Mike decided that she must have gone for an early walk. He fixed himself some cereal and waited for her to come back. After an hour or so, he started to get impatient and began wandering through the house. He went up to Aunt Flo's bedroom, and was surprised to find the door closed, because when he had gotten up, he was sure that the door had been open and the room empty. He knocked on the door and called out, "Aunt Flo, are you going swimming this morning?" He heard a faint sound from the other side of the door that sounded like the groaning of a bullfrog. Then he heard Aunt Flo's voice saying, "I'm not feeling too good right now honey, why don't you play outside today?" At first she sounded a little hissy the way she had sounded on the train. That reminded him of the dream. Yes, the dream. He'd had it again last night, but had almost forgotten. He shuddered. Then he remembered that he'd seen a swing set in the next-door neighbor's back yard, and he went outside to see if there were any kids his age living there.

Mike walked along the hedge that separated Aunt Flo's back yard from that of her neighbor. He found the hole that he had looked through when he saw the swing set, and pushed his way through. As he got clear of the hedge, he was surprised to see an upside down face looking at him. "Hi," the face said. "Are you a spy from Old Lady Karch's house?"

"I'm staying with my Aunt Flo for a while," Mike replied, "and I guess she's an old lady, but I'm no spy. My name's Mike, what's yours?"

"My name's Dan," said the owner of the upside down face. He was a boy about Mike's age, and he was hanging by his knees from the top bar of the swing set. "Can you prove You're not a spy?"

"Of course," Mike exclaimed. "Look at this pocket knife. No spy would carry a knife like this."

"What a puny knife!" Dan replied. "Mine's a lot bigger than that. But I guess you're right, no spy would carry a Davy Crockett pocket knife."

"C'mon, I'll show you the woods," Dan said jumping down from the swing set. He ran in the house to get his own pocket knife, which turned out to be exactly the same size as Mike's, and the two boys headed for the woods behind Dan's house.

"My dad says your aunt is a weirdo," Dan said as they were walking among the trees.

"Oh yeah? Well maybe your dad is a weirdo too."

"It's just since the big lightning storm last summer. She used to be a really cool old lady, but since then, she just stays home and yells at anyone who comes in her yard."

"Yeah, she did used to be pretty cool, but lately she keeps forgetting stuff and saying the same things over and over," Mike admitted.

"I bet she got struck by lightning," Dan said. "I was watching out the window, and there was a big flash and her house was all blue and glowing for a couple of minutes."

"That was just your imagination," Mike replied. "Lightning wouldn't make a house glow, it would catch something on fire."

"Oh yeah, smarty! I was here and you weren't."

"Hey, look at that cool tree house!" Mike interrupted.

"Yeah, me and my dad built that a couple of years ago. Come on up and I'll show you my stuff,"

Mike and Dan climbed up to the tree house, and spent the whole morning playing the sorts of games that boys play when no girls are around. They whittled a few sticks, and then Dan's mom was calling him to come home for lunch. They ran back to Dan's house, and as he was going inside Dan yelled, "Come over tomorrow, and I'll show you how to catch crawdads in the creek."

Mike went back to Aunt Flo's, and made himself a ham sandwich for lunch. Aunt Flo still seemed to be sick, because she was still in her room with the door locked. So Mike decided to spend the afternoon exploring the basement. Aunt Flo's basement was just the sort of place that a boy would love. It was full of old stuff that had been collected up for years and years. There were a couple of old TV sets, partly taken apart, some old radios, an old fashioned telephone, and all sorts of mysterious and wonderful junk. Mike spent most of the afternoon making a robot out of an old washtub and some discarded pieces of pipe. Just as he was finishing up, he heard a humming sound coming from the furnace room. "That's funny," he thought. "Why would the furnace be on in the middle of the summer?" He opened the door to take a look, and couldn't believe his eyes. There, right where Aunt Flo's old furnace used to be was a bright shiny machine covered with flashing colored lights. "That's really some furnace!" Mike exclaimed. Just then he heard Aunt Flo's voice calling him.

“Mike, Mike, what are you doing down there?” she called. “It’s time to come up for dinner.”

“I’ll be right up,” he yelled back slamming the door. He ran upstairs, to the kitchen where Aunt Flo had fixed hot-dogs and corn for dinner.

“I thought we might go to the movies tonight,” Aunt Flo said as she was washing the dishes. “Aliens 5 is playing just down the street.”

“All right!” Mike said, thinking that Mom and Dad would never let him watch a movie like that.

That night, after the movie, Mike had the dream again.

For the next few days, Mike found it hard to keep from being bored. Except for the movie, Aunt Flo didn’t seem to want to go anywhere or do anything. She either locked herself in her room, claiming that she was sick, or she sat rigidly upright in her chair staring at the TV. The worst of it was, the TV wasn’t even tuned in properly. The screen was all wiggly like when you fool around with the controls in back without asking permission. At first, he tried to fix it for her. He fooled around for a while and got Jeopardy tuned in just right, but after he left the room, she got up and put it back the way it was.

Mike and Dan were becoming good friends, but Dan was never home in the afternoon, because he had to go to the sitter’s while his mother helped out at the library. One day Mike decided to show Dan his most prized possession in the whole world, his Space Commander Super Stun Gun.

“Wow!” Dan said. “My uncle showed me how to fix one of these up really good!”

“I sort of like it the way it is,” Mike replied.

“Oh don’t be a baby, I wouldn’t hurt it any. Besides, you need some parts from an old TV set, and we don’t have any.”

“I know where there’s some old TV sets,” Mike answered.

They sneaked quietly into Aunt Flo’s basement and dug out one of the old TVs. They carried it out to the tree house, and Dan set to work. First he opened the handle of the Space Commander Super Stun Gun. Then he pulled a few parts out of the old set, saying “No, not that one,” or “Yes, this one,” and sticking them into the handle of the gun. Finally he was finished. Mike didn’t think much of this little show, but when Dan pulled the trigger, the Gun emitted such a howl that he thought his teeth would fall out.

“Wow! You really did it!” Mike exclaimed. Dan seemed as surprised as Mike.

Immediately, the boys heard Aunt Flo’s voice calling, “Mike ... Mike ... come in here and stop making that awful racket!”

“I’m in trouble now,” Mike said. “Hang onto my Space Commander Super Stun Gun for me until she calms down,” and he ran off.

When he got to Aunt Flo’s she was waiting for him on the back porch. “Give me whatever it was that made that awful noise,” she demanded.

Mike didn’t usually tell lies, but there was something in Aunt Flo’s voice that made him afraid. Something that reminded him of the voice in the dream. She searched his pockets, as if she knew he had lied to her. When she was satisfied that he really didn’t have anything, she looked deep into his eyes and said in a slow scary voice, “This must never, *never* happen again. You understand? *Never!*” She turned to go in the house and then stopped and came back. She grabbed him by the arms and said in a voice that was

even scarier than before, “*And stay out of the basement!*” She turned around and went back in the house.

Mike was so upset that he ran off and hid in the woods until it was almost dark. When he crept back into the house, Aunt Flo was sitting staring at the wiggly picture on the TV. He grabbed an apple and some cookies, and sneaked past her to his room.

That night, he had the dream again, but this time it was longer, and scarier. As before, he dreamed he was in a long dark hallway. But this time, he turned and looked around instead of walking toward the light. On his left he saw a glowing rectangle on the wall about the size of a doorway. But there was no door. Behind him, away from the light, he could see the entrance to a big room. He walked through the entrance and there in the very center of the room was a pedestal with a glowing red crystal on it. The crystal hummed and vibrated. It made a noise just like the shiny machine in Aunt Flo’s basement. Just as Mike was about to turn and run, the sound changed to a rattling noise. Suddenly the crystal cracked, and a piece about the size of the small blade on Mike’s pocket knife flew out of it. Then he did run.

He ran all the way down the hall to the balcony. Even though he knew what was coming, he couldn’t move. He just stood and watched as the sky clouded up and the rain started. This time, after the tentacle of rain touched his hand, it wrapped itself around him and began to suck all the warmth out of his body. It tightened, and jerked him off of the balcony into the sky. He looked up and saw that he was being pulled up into a red hungry mouth.

Mike screamed and woke up. He was sure that Aunt Flo must have heard him, but there was no sound from her room. He went out into the hall, and saw that her door was hanging open and that her room was empty. Mike was too scared to go back to sleep, so he went downstairs looking for Aunt Flo. She wasn’t downstairs either, but the door to the basement was open. Forgetting Aunt Flo’s warning, he started down the basement stairs. About halfway down, he heard some sounds coming from the furnace room. It was a voice that sounded a little like his Aunt, and a little like the voice in the dream. “Don’t worry, it didn’t hurt you. *He* didn’t hurt you.” And then a laugh. A laugh that sounded like the rattling of dried bones. “It is almost ready, and the young one will be useful.”

This was just too much. Mike ran back to his room and locked the door. He tossed and turned but finally went back to sleep.

When Mike awoke, sunlight was streaming into his room. Aunt Flo was nowhere to be found, and there was a large padlock on the basement door. He ate some cereal, and drank the last of the milk, and then headed out to find Dan. He told Dan about his dream and the weird things he had heard in the basement the night before. He also told him about the bright shiny thing in Aunt Flo’s furnace room.

“Man oh man!” Dan exclaimed. “We better check this out.”

“We can’t,” Mike said, “She locked the basement door and took off someplace.”

“Oh yeah? I know a secret way into that basement that I’ll bet your aunt doesn’t know anything about.”

“Really? Show it to me,” said Mike.

Dan took Mike around to the front of Aunt Flo’s house, and crawled behind the bushes that lined the front of the house.

“Come on in,” he called. Mike crawled in after him. Dan was kneeling in front of a hole that led under the front porch. The boys crawled through the hole and found an old iron door set into the side of the house. Dan pulled the door open saying, “This leads right into your aunt’s basement. I used to sneak in here all the time before she got so crabby.” The boys climbed down into the basement and began to explore.

“The furnace room is right over there,” Mike said, “The door is closed, but I don’t think it’s locked.” The boys opened the furnace room door and went in. “See,” Mike said, “Isn’t this a weird furnace?”

“Yeah,” Dan replied, “I wonder when she got that. Last time I was down here all she had was a clunky old furnace that looked like it was a hundred years old.”

“There must be something else in here,” Mike said. “I heard her talking to someone last night, and there were lots of other strange noises.” He started searching the brick wall behind the furnace saying, “I’ll bet there’s a secret door here somewhere.”

Mike tried pushing on several of the bricks, and much to the boys surprise, one of the bricks seemed to be loose. He pushed harder on it, and there was a swishing sound as a door opened in the wall. “Come on, let’s see what’s in here,” he said stepping through the door.

“I don’t know,” Dan replied. “This looks scary.”

“Come on, come on, don’t be a fraidy cat! We’ve got to find out what’s going on down here.”

There was a light-switch on the wall and Mike reached over and snapped it on. The boys were horrified by what they saw. They started to run away, but then their curiosity got the better of them and they turned back and began to examine the contents of the room. On the floor were several large white pod-shaped things that looked like huge squirming maggots. They twitched and wiggled as the boys stared at them. Most of them were milky white in color, but the largest ones near the door were almost transparent. They seemed to contain people, or something shaped like people. But the shapes were all red and bloody looking with spidery veins all over them. The pod closest to the door looked as if it had been split open and then sewed back shut. The thing inside this pod looked almost human. In fact, they could almost make out the face.

“It looks like someone I know,” Dan said, “but I can’t quite figure out who.”

“Look at that,” Mike said. He was pointing at a black rectangle on the back wall of the secret room. It looked as if it had been burned into the wall. “It looks like the glowing doorway in my dream,” he said, “but it’s not glowing.”

“There’s something else,” Dan said, pointing at something that looked like a coffin with all sorts of dials and wires on it. “Let’s open it and see what’s inside.”

“How do you know it opens up?” Mike said sarcastically. “And if it does, there’s probably a dead body inside. I don’t want to see a dead body.”

“A dead body couldn’t be any worse than those things,” Dan retorted examining the coffin carefully.

Mike had to admit that Dan was right, so he began to help.

“Here it is,” Mike said, pulling a lever at the end of the coffin. There was a hissing sound of air being sucked inside, and the lid slowly opened.

“Look!” Dan shouted, “It’s your aunt.”

indeed it was. Lying in the bottom of the coffin was Aunt Flo. At first the boys thought she was dead, but as they watched, they could see that she was breathing. She had several needles poked into her arm. Attached to the needles were clear tubes that seemed to have something running through them. She had a helmet attached to her head. There was a bundle of wires connecting the helmet to the inside of the coffin.

“That’s why you couldn’t find her,” Dan said. “She was lying down here in this coffin when you got up.”

Mike started to agree, but just then the boys heard Aunt Flo’s voice coming from the house.

“Mike, Mike,” she called, “I told you to stay out of the basement, now you’ll have to be punished.”

The boys ran back through the furnace room into the main part of the basement. They could hear the sound of someone unlocking the basement door.

“Come on, lets beat it,” Mike called to Dan.

They ran to the iron door and climbed up under the porch. They shut the door and crawled out into the front yard. Just as they made it to the front lawn, Aunt Flo jerked open the door and strode out onto the porch.

“You get right up here on this porch, young man! I want to talk to you,” she screamed.

Instead both boys took off running for the woods. They ran as fast as they could until they came to the tree house, where they quickly climbed up. They laid down on the floor and hid, but no one followed them. When they thought it was safe to breathe again, Dan asked, “If that was your aunt in the basement, who was that on the porch?”

“I don’t know,” Mike replied. He was having a hard time keeping from crying. Here he was hundreds of miles from home, without his mom or dad, and his aunt seemed to be either half dead or some kind of monster. “I don’t know what to do. I’m afraid to go back there and I don’t have anyplace else to go,” he said.

“I know what we could do,” Dan said. “We could go talk to Old Man Erbe. He knows everything.”

“Who?”

“Old Man Erbe. He lives in a shack on the other side of the woods.”

“He sounds like some kind of bum. What could he do?”

“He’s no bum. He’s got piles of books and he knows all about plants and trees and all sorts of other stuff.”

Mike finally agreed to go, but only because he didn’t know what else to do. As he was climbing out of the tree house he noticed something shiny lying on the floor.

“Hey!” he said. “Here’s my Space Commander Super Stun Gun. I thought you were going to keep this for me!”

“Well, it’s my tree house isn’t it? So I kept it for you here.”

Mike picked up the gun and stuck it in his pocket.

The boys splashed through the creek and followed the path to the other side of the woods. There they found an old shack with a wrinkled old man sitting in front of it. He had an enormous book open in his lap, and seemed to be asleep.

“Hey, Old Man Erbe! You asleep?” called Dan.

“No Dan, just thinking,” the old man replied. “Who’s your friend there?”

“This is Mike Maurer from Florida. He’s staying with Old Lady Karch for a few weeks.”

“I call her Aunt Flo,” Mike interjected.

“Ah yes, Miss Karch. Something strange has been happening at her house. Are you sure you’re safe?” the old man asked.

“I don’t feel very safe at all,” Mike replied.

The boys told Old Man Erbe about the things they had seen in Aunt Flo’s basement, and about all the strange things that had happened in the last few days, including Mike’s dream.

The old man shook his head slowly. “This is very bad boys. Mike, you must not go back there alone. You will be in great danger.”

“Do you know what’s going on?” Mike asked.

“Yes,” the old man replied. “I know only too well what is going on. You see, I’ve been to the place that you saw in your dream.”

“You mean that place is real?” Mike asked, not quite believing what he heard.

“Yes it’s real. It’s real, and it’s dangerous. It’s not just you who’s in danger, Mike. The whole world is in danger.” The old man closed his book and laid it on the ground.

“The woman you saw in the basement is your real aunt, Mike. That other woman, ... no not woman, that *thing*, is something that grew out of one of those pods you found in the basement. The thing needs to keep your aunt alive so it can read her memories and pretend to be your aunt. When it doesn’t need her anymore, it will suck her dry and leave her like a pile of dust. The clear pods were almost ripe. When they hatch, the *things* inside will take over other people. The new *things* will grow new pods and do the same thing all over again. Eventually they will destroy everyone.”

“Can’t we stop them?” Mike asked. “Can’t we just go down and kill the pods before they get ripe, or shoot them or something?”

“I tried that once. They’re too tough. Bullets don’t hurt them. Even fire doesn’t seem to bother them much. You have to use different weapons with these creatures.”

“You mean this has happened before?” Dan exclaimed.

“Yes, boys. This happened before, when I was about your age. It didn’t get this far though. My father and I found the pods when they were small, and we made them go back to where they came from.”

“You mean the place I saw in my dream,” Mike said.

“Yes, that place. They come here through the glowing doorway you saw.”

“But it wasn’t a real doorway,” Mike said. “It was just a glowing shape the size of a doorway.”

“No, it’s a real door. You walk through it in one place and come out some place else far away. That burned spot on the wall in your aunt’s basement is connected to the glowing doorway you saw in your dream. It doesn’t work unless it’s glowing.”

“How did you make the pods go back to that place?” Dan asked.

“The glowing red crystal in Mike’s dream is the thing that gives the pods life.” The old man explained. “My father and I scared them by damaging the crystal. We made a tin whistle that was so loud and high pitched that we thought it would shatter the crystal into a thousand pieces. That would have killed them all, But it didn’t work as well as we

thought it would. The crystal was too tough. It cracked, and a piece flew out, but it didn't shatter."

"That's why the thing got so mad when we shot the Space Commander Super Stun Gun." Mike exclaimed. "The sound must have hurt them somehow."

"Yes, I'm sure it hurt them." the old man said sadly. "It hurt them, but it didn't kill them. I don't know if anything can kill them. I'm sorry boy's, but I don't know what to tell you. Let me think on it some."

Dan got up and started off motioning for Mike to following him. When they got out of the old man's earshot Mike whispered, "Why are we leaving, he just said he had to think about it."

"No, when he says that, it means that he's all done talking," Dan replied. "We won't get anything more out of him."

Slowly, Mike followed him back to the tree house.

The closer Mike got to the tree house, the more he knew that he had to do something. He thought to himself, "If I try to do something, I might get killed. But if I don't do anything, the pod people will take over everybody in the whole world, even me and I'll be dead anyway. And so will Mom and Dad."

"I'm going to wipe out those pod people," Mike said to Dan.

"Yeah, you and what army?"

"I need to use your tree house tonight. I can't go home," was Mike's only reply. He knew that he had to wait until the door was glowing, and he figured that night would be the best time to check on it, since that was when the Aunt Flo thing had been in the basement. He laid down on the floor of the tree house to wait until dark.

Mike awoke with a start and looked around trying to figure out where he was. It all came back to him in a rush. He looked outside and saw that it was already dark. "It's time to go," he said to himself. He climbed down and started for Aunt Flo's house. Suddenly he heard somebody calling out to him in a low voice.

"Mike! Where are you?" the voice said. Suddenly Mike realized it was Dan.

"Dan! What are you doing here," he whispered.

"I'm coming to help you. I had to wait until my mom and dad went to sleep."

The two boys started off together for Aunt Flo's house. They crawled through the iron door, the same way they had come in that morning. They walked through the furnace room, and opened the door to the secret room. When they turned on the light, the room looked pretty much the same way it had that morning. The coffin was closed, and the doorway on the back wall was still black and not glowing. When Mike saw this, he wasn't sure what to do. Then the pod nearest the door, the one that looked like it had been sewed up, began to move. Slowly, it began to split down the middle. The shape inside sat up and began to climb out of the pod.

"Look!" Dan cried, "It's Old Man Erbe."

Sure enough, the thing climbing out of the pod looked just like the old man they had talked to earlier that day.

"That's not Old Man Erbe," Mike said. "That's another one of those things."

He pulled the Space Commander Super Stun Gun out of his pocket and pulled the trigger. Just as before, the gun made an awful howling noise that rattled the walls of the room and almost shook Mike's teeth out. The effect on the Old Man Erbe thing was

spectacular. First it collapsed like letting the air out of a balloon. Then the head began to swell up. It grew larger and larger until it was about the size of a beach ball, and then it exploded splattering the walls and the boys with green gooey gunk. At the same time three of the closest pods ripped open, and the creatures inside began screaming. Mike was so terrified that he started pulling the trigger of the gun over and over again. Every time he pulled the trigger, more of the pods split open, and more of the creatures inside burst. Suddenly it was quiet. The boys looked around at the gooey awful mess in front of them. All of the pods had split open, and all of the creatures inside had exploded.

Throughout all of this, Dan had stood stock still, petrified with fright. When he found his voice to speak he said, "I ... I ... I ... I guess we got them all."

"No," Mike said, just as terrified. "There's still the Aunt Flo thing, and the red crystal."

Just as he finished speaking there was a loud *Crack* and a glowing blue spot appeared on the back wall inside the burned rectangle. There was another *Crack*, and the Blue glow opened up covering the burned rectangle.

"The door's open," Mike shouted, "Let's go!"

Before the boys could move there was a low humming sound from the doorway and the Aunt Flo thing stepped through into the room. It didn't talk, it just screamed and charged at the boys. Mike pulled the trigger on the gun once more. The Aunt Flo thing collapsed on the floor, but it must have been tougher than the Old Man Erbe thing, because after a few seconds it began to re-inflate and tried to stand up. Mike pulled the trigger on the gun again, and then again, over and over. Finally the Aunt Flo thing exploded just like the others.

"We got her," Mike said, "Now let's get the crystal."

The boys edged towards the glowing blue doorway, and finally they both screwed up their courage and ran through. When they passed through the doorway they felt a tingling, like static electricity. Then they were standing in the hallway that Mike had seen so many times in his dream. "The crystal is this way," Mike said.

The crystal looked just a Mike remembered it from his dream. There was a thin crack running through it, and a little space where the piece had flown out of it.

"Shoot it!" Dan cried.

Mike raised the gun and pulled the trigger. The crystal vibrated, and the crack widened a little bit, but it didn't break. Mike tried again and again, but the crystal wouldn't shatter.

"Here, let me try something," he said handing the gun to Dan. "You pull the trigger and when the crack opens up, I'll try to stick my knife into it and pry it apart."

Mike pulled his Davy Crockett knife out of his pocket and opened the little blade. "OK, ready," he said.

Dan pulled the trigger, and Mike quickly jammed the blade of his knife into the gap in the crystal. The crystal made a low moaning noise, and began to vibrate as if it were trying to shake out the knife blade. Mike held on tight and pushed the blade in further. "Shoot it again," he called.

Dan pulled the trigger again, and just as the crack began to widen, Mike twisted the knife viciously. The Crystal made a loud *Crack* and shattered into a thousand pieces. Instantly there was a loud howling sound from outside. It sounded like it was made by a

mouth as wide as the whole sky. “*Youuuu,*” it howled. “*Youuuu haaaave dessstrooooyed Meeeee!*” and it faded out to nothingness. Just as the voice was dying away, the boys heard another voice calling to them from the hallway.

“Hurry boys, hurry! The doorway is closing!” It was Old Man Erbe.

The boys ran down the hall toward the door, which was beginning to flicker and shrink. First Dan jumped through and then Mike. Just as they landed back in the secret room the doorway snapped shut and was gone. Old Man Erbe was standing in the middle of the room crying. “You did it,” he sobbed “You did it. I was too afraid to fight the pod people, but you were brave and destroyed them all.”

Mike felt like jumping for joy, but there was still one more thing that he needed to do. “Come help me with Aunt Flo,” he said. He walked over to the coffin and pulled the lever to open the lid. Much to everyone’s surprise, Aunt Flo was awake, and seemed to be surprised to see everyone.

“Do you remember what happened to you?” asked Old Man Erbe.

“Let’s see,” Aunt Flo mumbled. “There was a funny noise in the basement, and I came down to see what was wrong.” Her face brightened, “Oh I know,” she said. “I bet you’re all here to fix the furnace!”